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ABSTRACT

Noting that different audiences have constructed widely varying interpretations of the figure and work of Margery Kempe ("The Book of Margery Kempe" dates from the beginning of the 15th century), this paper examines the subversiveness of Margery's rhetoric for medieval audiences and for modern audiences and students. The paper first details Margery's background--her marriage to the burgess John Kempe, the birth of 14 children, her visitation by Christ which she interpreted as a sign that she should seek a spiritual vocation, her vow of chastity and subsequent life serving the needy, and the attention she received during the Lollard heresy in England because of her unconventional lifestyle. The paper then recounts the way that Margery employed rhetorical strategies to defend herself against the charge of heresy and why her words and behavior appeared threatening and subversive to the populace and the authorities. The paper also contends that Margery's rhetorical moves function subversively for contemporary readers/students, since her rhetoric disrupts modern audiences conventional notions concerning the author's identity and authority. The paper relates that Lynn Staley Johnson and John Erskine hold opposite opinions about the illiterate Margery's use of scribes to record her life story and then explores the two scholars' studies of Margery's work. The paper concludes with a discussion of several feminist scholars' interpretations of Margery Kempe's rhetoric, focusing on her habit of crying. Contains 14 references and a note. (NKA)

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Margery Speaking from the Margins: The Subversiveness of Margery Kempe's Rhetoric for Medieval and Modern Audiences

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Margery Speaking from the Margins: The Subversiveness of Margery Kempe's Rhetoric for Medieval and Modern Audiences

Praised and vituperated in her day as well as ours, Margery Kempe seems somewhat enigmatic--especially since different audiences have constructed such widely varying interpretations of her life and book, The Book of Margery Kempe. Like others who have pushed the boundaries of gender roles and class conventions, Margery has been hailed as a pioneer and reviled as a hypocrite, heretic, and madwoman. Moreover, like other iconoclasts, Margery's rhetoric is volatile, subversive--subversive enough to open temporary spaces for reconstructing identity and culture, and volatile enough to threaten traditional sources of religious and secular authority. The subversive rhetorical moves in Margery's autobiography include her claims to having spiritual dialogues with God, Christ, and a variety of saints--dialogues which circumvent the Church's hierarchy and give her direct access to heavenly authority. Furthermore, she employs this authority in radical ways, for she uses it to justify living chaste and apart from her husband; to confirm her vocation as a holy woman living outside the cloister; to sanction her teaching of God's word in public and private; and to legitimize her rebuking of others' unrighteousness. In appropriating God's authority to sanction these activities, of course, Margery ends up challenging ecclesiastical and secular hierarchies as well as critiquing traditional women's roles.

In this article, I want to examine the subversiveness of

Margery's rhetoric for medieval and modern audiences. I've already suggested that Margery's rhetoric would have seemed threatening to at least some church and civil authorities in medieval England as well as to men and women who favored maintaining traditional gender roles. However, I believe that Margery's rhetoric may function in subversive ways for modern audiences, too. Specifically, some of the rhetorical moves Margery uses to validate her text and mediate readers' responses can be read as subverting readers' conventional notions concerning authorship and textual authority. In addition, Margery's crying outbursts might be interpreted rhetorically as operating like Helene Cixous's and other feminists' practices of exploding conventional (patriarchal) discourse by writing through the female body, for like Cixous's and other feminists' subversive writing Margery's crying functions as an irreducible signifier that cannot be suppressed, that disrupts patriarchal discourse, and that helps create sites for redefining woman's identity, relationships, history.

In order to begin to understand the subversiveness of Margery's rhetoric for her contemporaries and for modern audiences, one must first know something of her background. Margery Kempe was born about 1373 in the city of Lynn (now King's Lynn) in Norfolk. Her father, John Brunham, had the honor of serving five times as mayor of Lynn. Her husband John Kempe, whom she married about 1393, was a burgess. During their marriage, Margery bore him fourteen children (Pearson 369). After the birth

of one of her children, Margery was afflicted so grievously by illness and guilt for her sins that she suffered delirium and madness until she received a visitation from Christ who delivered her. After her recovery, she tried her hand briefly at brewing and milling; but when both ventures failed, she took it as a sign that she should seek a spiritual vocation (The Book of Margery Kempe 6-11). This account, besides telling of Margery's conversion, provides additional evidence that Margery belonged to the upper-middle class. After all, though Margery wasn't of the nobility, she had enough money to set up her two business ventures, a sign that she had more than enough money to supply her needs.

Although Margery's wealth identified her with other women of her class, other aspects of her life clearly set her apart. One of the main things that set her apart from other women was the degree of freedom and independence she managed to procure. Most women of Margery's day had few vocational options. In medieval England, the two socially sanctioned options were marriage or the convent. If a woman chose marriage, she would be expected to serve her husband and children full time through household duties. If she chose the vocation of a nun or an anchoress, she was expected to live vows of chastity and to confine herself to a cloister or hermitage. The first option made her a servant in society; the second placed her in a restricted environment. Unlike most medieval women, Margery Kempe managed to reconfigure these two roles to suit her own sense of her unique vocation.

Procuring permission from her husband to live in chastity and to dwell apart from him, Margery nevertheless didn't confine herself to a cloister. Instead, following the precedent of continental women mystics like Blessed Angela of Foligno and St. Bridget of Sweden (Lucas 296), Margery opted for a spiritually active life in the world, a life filled with serving the needy, making pilgrimages, weeping and praying for the living and dead, teaching the word of God, and reproving the wicked for their sins.

In spite of the precedent set by continental women mystics who were married and who chose to practice their spirituality outside the convent, the spread of Lollard heresy in England made Margery's high-profile, unconventional way of life dangerous. Initiated by the reformer John Wyclif, the Lollard heresy swept through the ranks of some of the English clergy and populace in the latter half of the fourteenth century. In fact, in 1393 two members of the Privy Council preached Wyclif's doctrines before Parliament (Boyd 112). Among other things, the Lollard heresy had to do with "Wyclif's teaching on the nature of the Eucharist and its relationship to the virtue of the consecrating priest" (114-15). To combat Lollard heresy, Parliament passed laws in January 1401 making heresy an act of treason, punishable by death on the pyre (112-13). In the context of the Church's efforts to eliminate Lollardry, any deviation from the norm, such as Margery's unconventional lifestyle, led the prelates and populace to suspect heresy. But even though Margery had enemies who wanted

to condemn her as a Lollard, she was fortunate enough to convince the Abbot of Leicester and the Archbishop of York of her orthodoxy (Book 114-15, 123-25).

With this background in mind, it is easier to understand how some of Margery's medieval audiences might have found her rhetoric subversive. Since John Wyclif's teachings had become a rallying point for political struggles and challenges to Church authority, and since the church and its secular allies were eager to remove such opposition, Margery's nonconformist behavior led authorities to identify her incorrectly as a Lollard. When she was examined before the Abbot of Leicester--and later before the Archbishop of York--she was questioned concerning the Articles of the Faith, and especially concerning the doctrine of the sacrament (Book 115, 125). Although Margery succeeded in demonstrating her orthodoxy, the Mayor of Leicester continued trying to condemn her by accusing her of plotting to lead men's wives away from them (116). After repelling the mayor's accusation and leaving Leicester, Margery next had to prove her orthodoxy to the Archbishop of York. When the Archbishop was satisfied that Margery was no heretic, he commanded her to swear not to teach or rebuke the people of his diocese (125-26). Refusing to swear such an oath, Margery cited a scriptural account in which Jesus commended a woman for publicly praising him and his mother. Using this account as a rhetorical move in her argument, moreover, Margery claimed that "þe Gospel geuyth me leue to spekyn of God" (126). At this point, a clerk responded

with the Pauline doctrine that women may not preach. Margery countered with the response that she doesn't preach, for, she said, "I come in no pulpytt" (126). Instead, she maintained, "I vse but comownycacyon & good wordys, & þat will I do whil I leue" (126). Though Margery succeeded in proving her orthodoxy and defending her right to teach, the clerks of York nevertheless implored the Archbishop to expel her from their diocese, for, they said, "þe pepil hath gret feyth in hir dalyawnce, and perauentur sche myth peruertyn summe of [them]" (125).

As these accounts show, Margery's rhetoric leads her to be perceived as subversive--even after she has been cleared of heresy charges. Skillfully employing a rhetorical strategy, she justifies her right to teach the words of God by citing an irreproachable authority, the words of Christ in the New Testament. When the clerks counter with the Pauline doctrine that women may not preach, she responds adroitly by making a distinction between the definition of communicating and the definition of preaching, and by claiming only the right to communicate the words of God. The most subversive part of Margery's rhetoric, though, is her claim of having direct access to an ultimate ground of authority: Christ, the Word of God. In her book, this claim is expressed through her many dialogues with Christ, dialogues in which Christ authorizes her to take actions that sometimes conflict with the will of her husband and Church authorities. Many of her contemporaries, moreover, validate her claims to divine authority. After her heresy trials in York, for

example, many of the common people and clerks acknowledge her divine source of authority, for, as Margery's Book recounts, they "enioyed in owr Lord þat had gouyn hir not lettryd witte & wisdom to answeryn so many lernyd men wyth-owtyn velani or blame. . ." (128). Perhaps it is this broad recognition in York of Margery's divine support that impels the clerks at her trial to seek her expulsion from their diocese, for they likely perceive her as a threat to their authority.

Besides appearing threatening and subversive to the Yorkshire clerks, Margery's strong claims to a divine source of authority also appear subversive to civic authorities and to her confessors. Perhaps the civic authorities, though, are the most threatened (or annoyed) by Margery's words and behavior, for they appear to be the ones orchestrating her heresy trials in an effort to condemn her and burn her as a Lollard. Long after the Abbot of Leicester has confirmed Margery's orthodoxy, for example, the Mayor of Leicester continues to level false charges against her, including the charge that she seeks to lead men's wives away from them (116). Likewise, the Duke of Bedford has her brought to trial for heresy after she was acquitted by the Archbishop of York. At the trial instigated by the Duke of Bedford, the duke's lackeys fail to convict Margery of heresy; and finally they admit that the duke wants to burn her because he alleges that Margery counselled his wife to leave him (132-33). Margery, of course, successfully denies these charges. It seems significant, though, that both the Duke of Bedford and the Mayor

of Leicester accuse Margery of trying to lead men's wives away from them. Although their accusations are false, they nonetheless show that Margery's unconventional words and behavior could be (and sometimes were) interpreted as radically subversive and threatening. Specifically, Margery's rhetorical strategy of employing divine authority to justify living apart from her husband--and the Church's tacit sanctioning of her independent way of life--was perceived by some as a rhetorical move and precedent that other women could follow, thus threatening their husbands' authority and estates. To eliminate this precedent and the potential for feminist subversion, then (and also, perhaps, to teach rebellious wives a lesson), men like the Duke of Bedford and the Mayor of Leicester sought to burn Margery as a heretic.

In addition to threatening secular authorities, Margery's appeals to divine Logos also threatened to undermine her confessors' authority. Although her confessors granted the validity of most of her divinely approved licenses--including her license to live apart from her husband--they nonetheless maintained that she sometimes overstepped her bounds. When Margery returned from her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, for instance, Christ gave her permission to wear white clothing as a token that she had been received as a bride of God. When she revealed her privilege to an anchorite in confession, however, he forbade her to don white clothing. Margery said that she would obey him gladly, if it were God's will. When Margery consulted God, however, he maintained that she should wear white clothing.

Moreover, he told her not to heed the anchorite's instructions, for, he said, "I wil not þat þu be gouernyd [by] hym" (103). Relying on God's authority, then, she disobeyed the anchorite's directions.

On another occasion, Margery bypassed ecclesiastical authority to accompany her daughter-in-law to Germany at Christ's behest. Just as she was about to embark on the sea leg of the trip, however, Margery began to have second thoughts about going since circumstances made it impossible for her to procure permission from her confessor before leaving. Strengthening her resolve to go, Christ comforted her with these words: "I bydde þe gon in my name, Ihesu, for I am a-bouȳn thy [confessor] & I xal excusyn þe & ledyn þe & bryngyn þe a-geyn in safte" (227). Just as Margery employed rhetorical appeals to divine Logos in ways that subverted secular authorities, then, so also she employed such appeals in ways that subverted ecclesiastical authorities.

Besides functioning subversively for medieval audiences, Margery's rhetorical moves also seem to function subversively for modern audiences. Specifically, Margery's rhetorical moves disrupt modern readers' conventional notions concerning the author's identity and authority. For example, although Margery claims that her illiteracy forces her to use scribes to record her life story, Lynn Staley Johnson argues that Margery deploys scribes and scribal conventions as tropes[1], tropes which she uses to legitimize her autobiography. In contrast to Johnson, John A. Erskine argues that Margery's scribes may usurp much of

the authorial role in The Book of Margery Kempe--and that Margery's account can be read as a stylized exemplum shaped and interpreted by the scribes. Regardless of how one tries to attribute authorship and intent in Margery's Book, the Book's rhetoric seems to subvert one's attempts--especially when one reads the Book from the perspectives of these two scholars, a doubled reading that raises questions for modern readers about how authority, authorship and intent are (mis)construed in language and rhetoric.

Pointing to these issues, Lynn Staley Johnson traces the tradition of using the scribe as a trope or figure in medieval literary and religious texts in her essay "The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe." Specifically, she explains in her essay how Margery's scribes function rhetorically as a tropes when read against this tradition.

Johnson first attests that scribes were important for medieval religious texts in general, for scribes helped to legitimize these texts. Also, the "presence" of a scribe in medieval religious text could be used strategically to mediate audience responses. Tracing the tradition of medieval religious authorities who dictated texts to scribes, Johnson says that St. Augustine, St. Gregory, and St. Bernard used scribes when composing (824). By the time of Hildegard of Bingen, the practice of using a scribe in the process of composing a religious text was perceived as a convention common to religious authorities, a

convention that women authors saw fit to appropriate in order to legitimize their texts (824).

Examining the medieval tradition of religious women writers, Johnson says that the messages of holy women and female mystics were mediated by male scribes or authors. Hildegard of Bingen, for instance, dictated her words to her scribe Volmar--and later, after his death, to another scribe assigned by the Pope (823-24). The teachings of Catherine of Sienna and Catherine of Genoa were dictated to male scribes; the life of Beatrice of Nazareth was translated into Latin by an anonymous confessor; and Bridget of Sweden's revelations were transcribed in Latin by her confessor (827). Furthermore, Thomas of Cantimpre and Jacques de Vitry narrated the lives of holy women, presenting them as pious exempla for their contemporaries (827-28). As these examples show, the religious texts of medieval women were often mediated by male writers. The reasons for this are several. First, many female religious authors in the medieval period were illiterate (and even those who could write in their native languages usually couldn't translate their texts into Latin, the common language of prestige in Europe). Nevertheless, even though medieval women authors often required the services of male scribes for pragmatic reasons, they surely still recognized the rhetorical value of employing scribes (and certain scribal conventions) in composing their texts.

After discussing the medieval tradition of using scribes in composing and authorizing texts, Johnson proceeds to argue that

Margery deliberately signifies on this tradition in her Book. Specifically, Johnson argues that Margery uses scribes not only as amanuenses--but also as tropes in her Book, tropes which she employs to authorize her autobiography and mediate her readers' responses (837-38). In fact, Johnson suggests that the scribes' most important function is tropological, rhetorical (837-38). Whatever role the scribes can be said to play in the Book's production, then, what counts (rhetorically) is the way that they function as tropes to validate her autobiography and mediate her readers' responses.

The words of the second scribe (a priest of Lynn) in the Book's proem serve as a good example in illustrating how the Book's scribal interpolations authorize Margery's account and mediate audience responses. According to the priest's account in the proem, Margery brought him a version of her autobiography transcribed by a former scribe, a version which she wanted the priest to translate into plain English. (The former scribe's transcript, a mixture of German and English written poorly, was barely decipherable.) Initially, the priest agreed to translate her book, but then he deferred doing so for four years because of the evil reports he heard concerning Margery. Eventually, the priest's conscience goaded him into keeping his promise, and he approached the task of translation with the intent of completing it. As the priest attempted to write, however, his eyesight deteriorated to the point that he could not see well enough, even with spectacles, to translate her book. Returning to Margery, the

priest complained about his failing eyesight. Margery told him that his condition was a result of the evil one's attempt to prevent her book's translation. Furthermore, she prayed on his behalf and encouraged him to take heart, promising that God would give him grace to translate if he would not give up. Returning to his task, the priest found that Margery's promises proved to be true, for he was able to read the text far more easily than ever before (Book 3-5). The priest, of course, took this miracle as a sign of divine approval for Margery's life and book; and his testimonial, in turn, both validated her text for its audience and anticipated and handled some of its audience's possible objections--objections, for instance, that attributed her spiritual gifts to illness or evil spirits rather than to divine grace. As Margery's Book shows, then--and as Lynn Staley Johnson argues--the scribal interpolations in Margery's Book, whether real or fictional, function as rhetorical conventions to authorize her autobiography and to mediate her audience's responses.

In contrast to Johnson's argument, John A. Erskine suggests that the priestly scribe may be read as usurping much of the authorial role in The Book of Margery Kempe--and that the Book may be read as a stylized rendering of Margery's life, a stylized rendering constructed by the priest as a pious exemplum for popular audiences (Erskine 84). Whether or not the Book is a genuine account of Margery's life dictated by her, what interests Erskine is that Margery's Book can be read as an exemplum

signifying on a long tradition of hagiography.

Describing some of the conventions of medieval hagiography, Erskine says that hagiographers often went out of their way to deny their authorial role by portraying themselves as mere compilers recording the testimonies of key participants and eyewitnesses (76-77). The main reason for this, Erskine says, is that first person- and omniscient third person narrative points of view were considered conventions of fiction genres (76). By adopting the role of a compiler presenting evidence from primary sources, then, medieval hagiographers attempted to authenticate their fictionalized accounts by avoiding conventions traditionally associated with fiction. Philip de Clarevalle gives a good example of this hagiographer's technique in his hagiography of Elizabeth of Spaldbeck, for whenever he relates events that he supposedly couldn't have witnessed, he adds explanatory comments like "as the forsyde abbot, hir confessour, tolde me" (qtd in Erskine 76). Thomas de Cantimpre makes a similar rhetorical move in Cristina Mirabilis's hagiography, for he uses the words of independent authorities to confirm and supplement his account. Validating his account, for instance, he claims that the events are recent and the witnesses reliable (Erskine 76-77). Furthermore, although he often slips out of the compiler's role and employs narrative conventions more appropriate to genres traditionally classified as fictional, he nevertheless makes blanket disclaimers in an effort to muster the expected <u>auctoritas</u> and to confirm his role as a mere reporter.

For instance, Cantimpre qualifies his authorial role by saying "Certaynly, othere thinges that no man mighte knowe but sche, I herde allonly of hem the whiche affermyd that hire-self tolde to hem with hir owne mouthe" (qtd in Erskine 77). With these words, Cantimpre claims to function as a traditional hagiography compiler--even though his narrative strategy doesn't always reflect such a function. As Cristina's and Elizabeth's hagiographies show us, then, the hagiographers' practice of qualifying their authorial role by claiming to be mere compilers makes their accounts seem more credible, for it allows them not only to avoid conventions associated with fiction but also to claim independent auctoritas to confirm and supplement their accounts.

Although there are significant differences between Margery's Book and traditional hagiographies (namely, the first-person narrative voice appearing in Margery's dialogues with Christ, religious authorities, and others), the priestly scribe in Margery's Book provides a validating frame much like the frame of a hagiography, a frame consisting of a proem and apparent scribal interpolations. Ultimately, like hagiography, Margery's Book employs conventions that readers can use to read it not strictly as an autobiography, but as an exemplum designed to teach moral lessons.

When one interprets Margery's Book in this way, of course, one also tends to read Margery's scribes as usurping much of the authorial role. Enquiring into the role of the scribes in The

Book of Margery Kempe, one might ask: Was the first scribe merely a passive amanuensis who recorded Margery's words just as she dictated them? Was the second scribe merely a translator who labored under Margery's close supervision to convert the German-English version of her Book into a legible English text? To what extent might these scribes be considered collaborators in the composition of her text? To what extent might they serve as active mediators between Margery, her text, and her audience? To what extent might they mediate, interpret, and filter her words for her audience? In what ways, for instance, do the scribal interpolations and framing devices influence readers' interpretations of Margery's Book? To what extent do the scribes encroach on the authorial role, usurp the authorial presence?

When considered in the context of the hagiographical tradition--and in the context of other literary and religious genres that employed scribal interpolations as conventions and tropes--the question of who is "speaking" or "writing" what in Margery's Book doesn't have a simple answer. In the hermeneutical dynamics of Margery's Book, the scribes and Margery seem to interact and function in complicated ways. The priestly scribe in Margery's Book seems to function in at least two ways: he sanctions Margery's claims to divine favor, and he presents her account in a way that supposedly allows it to "speak for itself." Curiously, in the hermeneutical dynamics of Margery's Book, these two functions seem to work against one another, to contradict one another. To serve as an auctoritie who sanctions Margery's

account, the priestly scribe must draw attention to himself, as he does in the proem and in other interpolations. To present the account as though Margery were "speaking for herself," however, the scribe must efface his role, his presence; he must deny his role as mediator, as translator, as intercessor between Margery and her audience. Only insofar as he can efface himself can the scribe allow the book's words to draw their full value and authority from Margery, God's medium.

Margery's priestly scribe, of course, shrewdly negotiates this scribal (or mediatorial) paradox by claiming that his power to translate comes not from himself, but from God--and through Margery's intervention (Book 4-5). By making this claim, the scribe can have his cake and eat it too: he can serve as a witness to sanction the divine authority of Margery's account, and he can deny any interference on his part.

The scribe's careful maneuvering doesn't come off quite so well in all parts of the Book, however. In chapter 31, for example, the Book gives the account of Margery losing her ring--an account which seems to draw attention to the mediating filter of the scribe's point of view. Accordng to the account, Margery lodged in a good man's house on her way home from Jerusalem. When she retired for the evening, she took off her ring--a ring symbolizing her wedded union with Christ--and hung it up by her purse string. When she awoke in the morning, though, the ring was missing. Upon discovering the loss, Margery notified the good wife of the house. The Book then gives the following report,

seemingly from the scribe's point of view.

> The good wyfe, vndirstondyng what sche [Margery] ment, preyde hir to prey for hir, and sche chongyd hir cher & hir cuntenawns wondyrly as thow sche had ben gylty. Þan þis creatur [Margery] toke a candel in hir hand & sowt al a-bowtyn hir bed þer sche had leyn al nygth, and þe good wyfe of þe hows toke an-oþer candel in hir hand & bisyed hir to sekyn also a-bowte þe bed. & at þe last sche fonde þe ryng vndyr þe bed on þe bordys, and wyth gret joye sche telde þe good wyfe þat sche had fownden hir ryng. (78-79).

Here, the character Margery betrays no awareness or suspicion that the good wife has stolen the ring; yet the narrator effectively uses language to implicate the good wife for the reader's sake. So who is telling this account? Or who is reinterpreting this account for the reader's benefit, the reader's edification? Did Margery put on an act--did she play dumb--in order to give the good wife a chance to repent and return the ring? Did Margery discover the true meaning of this experience (or was it revealed to her) only years later when she was dictating the Book? Did Margery deliberately efface her suspicions about the good wife in her dictated account in order to make her ethos more palatable--or in order to emphasize her role as a mere tool in God's hands? Or did the scribe reinterpret this account for the reader's benefit, emphasizing Margery's role as an unwitting tool in God's hands? I can't be sure. Can anyone?

If the account of Margery's life can be read as an exemplum following the tradition of hagiographies of other holy women's lives--and if the role of Margery's priestly "scribe" can be read in terms of the practice of hagiographers who deliberately downplayed their authorial role--then perhaps it's legitimate to ask Who is the author? and To what extent? Lynn Staley Johnson's article reads Margery as the author, and suggests that the scribe functions as a trope in her text. In contrast to Johnson's article, John A. Erskine's essay suggests that the priestly scribe may be read as usurping much of the authorial role in The Book of Margery Kempe--and that the Book may be read as a stylized rendering of Margery's life. Together, these two readings suggest some of the ways in which Margery's book can prove to be subversive for modern audiences, for the rhetorical moves used in the Book to claim authority and to mediate audience responses, when read against the traditions of hagiography and other medieval genres, end up questioning conventional notions concerning authors and textual authority. Ultimately, the play of this double reading suggests that authors are not self-evident presences or final authorities, but conventions of language and rhetoric, and therefore contingent, unstable, and subject to interpretation.

Much like Johnson's and Erskine's doubled reading of rhetorical conventions in Margery's Book, Margery's claim to a divine gift of tears--and the way she exercises that gift--also operate in rhetorically subversive ways for modern readers.

Specifically, her gift of tears functions as an irreducible signifier that cannot be suppressed, a signifier that disrupts male discourse in ways that can give women maneuvering room in language and rhetoric. Giving the history of her gift of tears, the Book says that Margery first received the gift of loud crying on her trip to Jerusalem while visiting the sites of the Lord's passion. There, her crying was evoked by mystical visions of the Lord's suffering. Describing how this gift affected Margery, the Book says

> . . . Sche had so gret compassyon & so gret peyn to se owyr Lordys peyn þat sche myt not kepe hir-self fro krying & roryng þow sche xuld a be ded þerfor. And þis was þe fyrst cry þat euyr sche cryed in any contemplacyon. And þis maner of crying enduryd many [years] aftyr þis tyme. . . . Þe cryeng was so lowde & so wondyrful þat it made þe pepyl astoynd les þan þei had herd it be-forn [or unless] þei knew þe cawse of þe crying. (68)

Much more than simply a vocal manifestation, however, Margery's gift of crying also involved bodily movement. Describing a specific instance of crying which emphasizes the bodily expressions that generally accompanied Margery's crying, the Book notes

> . . . Sche fel down þat sche mygth not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd & wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hir armys a-brode, & cryed wyth a lowde voys as þow hir

> hert xulde a brostyn a-sundyr, for in þe cite of hir sowle sche saw veryly & freschly how owyr Lord was crucifyed. (68)

Needless to say, after her return to Lynn her neighbors were more than astonished when she began interrupting church services with her new crying habits. Impossible to silence, Margery cried whenever she heard someone preaching or speaking of Christ's passion, whenever she meditated on Christ's passion, or whenever she saw someone who reminded her of Christ. As a result of this irrepressible gift of crying, Margery quickly lost favor with many of her neighbors. Some believed she was ill; others alleged she was possessed (151, 154); and still others suspected she was a hypocrite (156). A revered preaching friar serving in Lynn even banned her from his services, refusing to let her in unless she admitted that her crying was no gift, but rather a cardiac ailment, or some other sickness (151). Still, some ecclesiastical authorities and some of her neighbors believed that her crying was a gift from God (150-51).

Like Margery's contemporaries, many modern scholars also abuse Margery for her crying. Herbert Thurston, for instance, alleges that she suffers from "terrible hysteria" (qtd in Allen lxv); Edmund Colledge and David Knowles classify her as "a hysteric" (qtd in Bremner 130-131); Clare Bradford finds her "eccentric" and "neurotic"; Katherine Cholmeley labels her as "spiritually deluded" (qtd in Pearson 366); Hope Emily Allen calls Margery "petty, neurotic, [and] vain" as well as "devout .

. . forceful, and talented" (lxiv); and others claim that she is "mad" or "paranoid" (qtd in Bremner 130). Of course Margery still has supporters among modern scholars--those, for example, who revere her as a feminist forerunner or a valuable Christian mystic. Still, the ranks of her detractors--and the catalog of their epithets--is a telling sign that Margery occupies the margins in many modern scholarly discussions concerning medieval mystics.

Perhaps one of the reasons why Margery is so variously praised and vituperated, especially for her crying, is that her crying functions as an irreducible signifier, a signifier that disrupts the conventional codes and patterns of discourse. If Margery's crying functions in this way, then perhaps the experience of encountering it (or reading about it) is somewhat like the experience of reading that Roland Barthes describes as "bliss," the experience of reading that "brings to a crisis [the reader's] relation to language" (The Pleasure of the Text 14).

If Margery's crying is indeed an irreducible signifier, functioning in ways that bring readers to a crisis with language like the experience of reading Barthes calls "bliss," then perhaps Margery's crying is ideally suited for rhetorical moves in revolutionary feminist projects like Helene Cixous's, feminist projects that seek to disrupt male discourse patterns in an effort to create spaces for reconstructing women's identities, histories, and language. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Helene Cixous promotes a feminist practice of speaking, a practice

that's surprisingly similar to Margery Kempe's crying. Describing the manner of speaking she calls feminine, Cixous says

> Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering (if she hasn't painfully lost her wind). She doesn't "speak," she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the "logic" of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. (251)

By using this type of body-ridden feminine discourse, Cixous says, woman can disrupt male discourse and "invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes. . ." (256). In doing so, moreover, woman "blazes her trail in the symbolic," making of it "the chaosmos of the 'personal'--in her pronouns, her nouns, and her clique of referents" (258).

If Margery's crying can be read in some of the same ways as Cixous's practice of feminine speaking, then perhaps it can operate as a rhetorical move in feminist projects, a rhetorical move functioning to subvert male discourse patterns in ways that create maneuvering room for women in language and rhetoric. Like the feminine speaking that Cixous describes, Margery's crying is grounded in the passions and undulations of the female body. Moreover, like Cixous's description of feminine speaking, Margery's crying functions as a signifier that resists being

reduced or appropriated by logocentric discourse. (To confirm the irreducible quality of Margery's discourse, one need only turn to the myriads of medieval and modern interpretations of Margery's crying, interpretations that attribute Margery's crying to causes as diverse as hysteria, madness, paranoia, evil spirits, hypocrisy, drunkenness and divine inspiration.) Since Margery's crying so effectively resists audiences' attempts to arrive at a uniform, standard interpretation, it would seem to be a valuable resource for feminist projects, a resource that could be used either as a model for practicing feminist discourse, or as the focus for interpretive debates discussing gender relationships and how they are constructed, maintained, or subverted in language and rhetoric. Of course some feminist scholars have discussed Margery's crying in their debates, identifying her crying with Luce Irigaray's practice of speaking "languages of the body"--languages, they say, that can be used as rhetorical strategies in breaking up the patterns of patriarchal discourse and culture in an effort to create more maneuvering room for women. For Dhira B. Mahoney, Margery's sobs are a body-laden language that evades and subverts logocentric discourse patterns. Specifically, Mahoney says that Margery's cries serve as her "public language"--a public language which defies "the prohibitions of custom and the ecclesiastical system" (40). For Eluned Bremner, the subversive function of Margery's wails serves as a model for the practice of feminine discourse. Drawing on Luce Irigaray's discussion comparing the operation of feminine

discourse to hysteria, Bremner says that Margery's crying functions, like hysteria, in ways that "destabilize" logocentric discourse (including its teleology [132]), rebel "against patriarchal constructions of femininity" (132), and create "possible space[s] for women's self-representation" (132). Besides advocating that women practice a mode of discourse as rhetorically subversive as Margery's crying, Bremner also uses Margery's case as a segue leading to a discussion of the history of women's oppression as well as to a testimony-like appeal motivating women to overthrow the patriarchal structures of language and culture. Ultimately, then, feminist scholars like Mahoney and Bremner use Margery's crying not only as a model for subversive feminist discourse practices, but also as a fortuitous topic in interpretive debates, a topic that lends itself to rhetorical moves meant to support feminist revolutions in language and culture.

As this discussion of the rhetorical functions of Margery's crying shows--and as other discussions in this article show--The Book of Margery Kempe can function in rhetorically subversive ways for her audiences. Ultimately, Margery's Book proves subversive because of the rhetorical moves used to claim access to divine authority, to construct and legitimize an authorial presence, and to employ an irreducible signifier (Margery's crying) in ways that can be read as undermining patriarchal discourse. As a result, Margery's Book not only challenges many of her contemporaries' claims to authority, but it also subverts

many modern readers' conventional notions of language and authorship, bringing modern readers to a crisis with language and authorial identity.

Notes

1. In the second edition of A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms, Richard Lanham provides the following discussion of the term "trope":

> "Theorists have differed in defining this term, and any single definition would be prescriptive. Such consensus as there is wants trope to mean a figure that changes the meaning of a word or words, rather than simply arranging them in a pattern of some sort. (Thus the distinction would roughly correspond to that between true and false wit in the time of Pope.) That the placing of a word in a highly artificial pattern--a scheme--usually involves some change of its meaning is a point theorists have more often ignored than quarreled over.
>
> "Some theorists would like trope to be used for changes in meaning of one word only; for more than one word, figure. Quintilian, on the other hand, points out that change in meaning occurs on a larger scale than in single words, and that change in signification is the crucial issue. Donatus (followed by Bede) agrees, defining trope as a change from its normal significance of any utterance (dictio). For Quintilian, a figure is a form or pattern of speech or writing which differs from the ordinary. So, we might say that, for him, a trope is a change in meaning, a figure is a change in form. . . . . [Yet] his use of these terms in books VII and IX is by no means clear to me, especially in VII.vi.40, where the whole distinction seems to collapse. . . .
>
> "Two fundamental distinctions wander through the considerable theoretical disagreements: (1) changes in form and changes in meaning; (2) the size or scope of the change. . . . Scholars have used this cluster of terms with a confidence that is belied by the primary disagreement about them. (154-155)

As Lanham suggests here and elsewhere, defining "trope" is no simple task, for the authorities disagree. For this article, gloss "trope" as "re-appropriated, re-applied words and rhetorical conventions." Ultimately, I use "trope" in this article to refer not only to changes in the function and use of words, but also to changes in the function and use of rhetorical conventions, such as scribal interpolations and framing devices.

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